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Response Paper, “The House of Mirth” Ch. 5-15

In “The House of Mirth” by Edith Wharton, Lily Bart, a vain and money obsessed character, tries to satisfy not only her internal need for love and affection, but also her need for social elitism when she ventures in search for a spouse that provides both love and wealth. Unfortunately for Ms. Bart, this is extremely hard to come by. Ms. Bart has unfortunately given herself the enormously difficult feat of trying to satisfy both of those needs. Currently, from the reading that has already been done, its extremely easy to observe that Lily has very strong romantic feelings for Lawrence Selden, who unfortunately doesn’t live up to her social or financial expectations that she is looking for in a spouse. As a result, she continues to look for this perfect specimen of a mate, because regardless of her feelings towards Selden, he isn’t of the means to which she see’s herself being with.

Lily instead decides that she wants to marry Percy Gryce, mostly for his immense wealth and fantastic social standings. Even though she has this fantasy in her mind, it’s still extremely obvious that her feelings for Selden are not easily faded. In Chapter 6, Lily decides to cancel plans with Gryce in order to spend time with Selden. Selden also confides in her, that the only reason he even came to Bellomont was to see her. “‘Did you really come to Bellomont to see me?’ ‘Of course I did’ Her look deepened meditatively. ‘Why?’ she murmured, with an accent which took all tinge of coquetry from the question. ‘Because you’re such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see how you are doing’” (58). Selden truly does care for Lily, and she’s clearly very happy that he does, but unfortunately her vanity and lust for wealth prevents her from achieving happiness with someone she loves.

Additionally, because Lily can’t make up her mind between choosing true love or false happiness, she loses many opportunities. An example being, When Rosedale asks Lily for her hand in marriage, she tries to prolong the answer in hopes of Selden coming to propose. Unfortunately for Lily, because she isn’t able to make up her mind, Selden left to the Caribbean fed up, leaving Lily to join the Dorsets in France without being engaged to anyone.

Many events took place during this section of the novel, but the area of interest that stood out to me the most was definitely the way that Wharton creates the parallel between Lily’s lust to find true love, but also her lust to be economically and socially well endowed. Wharton illustrates to the reader that, if Lily leans towards true love, she will be truly happy, but would also become everything she was raised not to be, and live a life style she fears. On the other hand if she leans towards wealth, she will never be truly happy, but will be satisfied. She will also grow increasingly lonely. Wharton does an amazing job of creating this parallel that exists within the novel.